INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT TEAM INITIATIVE IN VIRGINIA

Don Fleming, Ph.D.
Virginia Department of Education

Denyse Doerries, Ed.D.
T/TAC at the College of Williams Mary

Donni Stickney, M.A.
T/TAC at the College of William& Mary

Bruce Spital, Ed. S.
Chesapeake City Public Schools

Instructional Support Team Initiative

To enhance student achievement and behavioral development, the Virginia Department of Education is using a portion of the funds received in its State Improvement Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop model Instructional Support Team (IST) sites in 13 elementary schools in Virginia. Training support from the Instructional Consultation Center at the University of Maryland has played an instrumental role in the IST Initiative. Along with site development work, center trainers help selected staff members at Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TACs) become skilled providing consultation and training services to existing and future IST sites.

Instructional Support Teams (ISTs) provide student intervention and professional development services. The professional development component of an IST can be quite sizeable because a full-time position, entitled IST teacher, is a key element of the services model. The IST teacher can present and model assessment practices and intervention strategies and coach teachers in effective applications in classrooms. The IST teacher also can support other team members to provide similar assistance to teachers. The critical assumption behind this design capability is that in many situations teachers need extensive help when acquiring new competencies to promote student learning and behavioral development.

Perhaps the greatest impetus to the launching the IST Initiative by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in December 1999 was data concerning the implementation of IST model of service delivery in over 1700 schools in 500 school districts throughtout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and in selected regions of New York State. Of particular interest to department staff were published reports from Pennsylvania that ISTs reduced student retentions up to 67 percent and referrals for multidisciplinary evaluations up to 46 percent (Kovaleski, Lowery, and Gickling, 1995). ISTs (n=21) served by a Board of Cooperative Educational Services based in Elmira, New York reported a comparable reduction (41%) in referrals (Schuyler-Chemung-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services, 2000).

Similar to results in Pennsylvania and New York, first year findings from the oldest or Cohort One IST sites (n=3) in Virginia identified reductions in multidisciplinary evaluation referrals ranging from approximately 17 to 63 percent (Werner, 2001). Presently, data is being processed by the VDOE for a second evaluation report of the IST Initiative. This evaluation covers the second full year of implementation of the IST services delivery model in Cohort One sites and the first full year of implementation of the newer teams, which started training in December 2002 and are labeled Cohort Two sites (n=5). Initial reports from two of the three reporting Cohort Two sites to date identify testing referral reductions, while a third site with a history of low testing loads experienced no changes from the 2000-2001 school year to the 2001-2002 school year. The sites with changes informed the evaluator for the IST Initiative of 25% and 88% reductions (Werner, personal communication).

Currently, data is available on goal attainment for students working with ISTs in two Cohort One sites and five Cohort Two sites during the 2001-2002 school year. Werner (personal communication), who is working on the final draft of the second evaluation report of the IST Initiative, stated that the learning domain received the most attention from teams. Seventy-three percent of the change goals written (132 of 181goals) focused on academic achievement, where as the second most popular change goal (n=49) centered on behavioral development. Many of them targeted improvements in achievement – related behaviors. Attachment A provides more information about academic change goals written for students receiving IST services this past school year.

Of particular interest in future evaluation work will be the contribution of ISTs to addressing the problem of over-representation of African-American students in special education programs. In a recent publication, school administrators were advised to implement effective prereferral systems such as an IST to prevent an over-representation problem (National Alliance of Black School Educators & ILIAD Project, 2002). A recent study conducted by personnel at the University of Maryland lends support to this recommendation. The findings of this study showed that the proportion (25%) of minority students served by 23 Instructional Consultation Teams (an Instructional Consultation Team is almost identical in design and operations to an IST) and traditional child study teams were equal. However, only 10% of the students served by the Instructional Consultation Team were evaluated and placed in special education compared to 63% of the minority students served by traditional prereferral services (Gravois, 2002).

When Cohort Three (n=4) and Cohort Four (n=2) sites complete their first full year of implementation, data will become available and the impact of the IST model of service **delivery** on school operations. Presently, Cohort Three sites are entering what is termed as the Maintenance Phase and will complete a full year of implementation in June 2003. Cohort Four sites are just beginning the Start Up Phase. See Attachment B for a listing of all sites and their development phases.

An appropriate expectation for team development is that it takes from three to five years to produce a high functioning IST. The Department of Edcation provides varied support for teams across the development phases: Direct training (large group across schools); on-site demonstration or training (across schools); and on-site follow-up and practice (individualized for each school). The training is very comprehensive. For example, the IST teacher receives approximately 25 days of training in the Start Up Phase with an emphasis on instructional consultation and instructionally -relevant assessment practices (see Attachment C for more information about training goals and objectives). The research has demonstrated the need for such extensive training to produce high quality teams that can make the system changes noted in the professional literature such as reductions in referrals for special education testing (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, and Swank, 1999).

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